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Despite assurances from the Bush administration, Congress appears to be losing patience with the Israeli-Palestinian peace process in the wake of new violence and accusations there.

At a House Appropriations State-Foreign Operations Subcommittee hearing, members of both parties chastised Deputy Secretary of State John D. Negroponte for continued funding requests for what they said was a non-functional, and potentially untrustworthy, Palestinian Authority government.

"I don't know what the word in Arabic is for 'rathole,' but it does appear that the usefulness for our funding is disappearing," said Mark Steven Kirk, R-Ill., adding that Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' authority has been reduced to "alderman for East Ramallah."

The militant Islamic Hamas movement has controlled the Gaza Strip since last June, leaving Abbas's government in charge of only the West Bank. Meanwhile, a group that monitors the Palestinian media alleged that Abbas, in a recent TV interview, did not clearly support Israel's right to exist and bragged that radical Islamic Hezbollah fighters had trained in Palestine Liberation Organization camps in the 1960s and '70s.

That led panel Chairwoman Nita M. Lowey, D-N.Y., to place a hold March 4 on \$150 million in economic support to the Palestinians.

"Clearly, Abu Mazen's comments cast doubt on his commitment to the peace process," she said Thursday, referring to Abbas by his common name.

Congress provided \$218.5 million in economic support to the authority in the fiscal 2008 omnibus (PL 110-161). Negroponte urged the panel to include \$220 million requested in October in the war supplemental Congress will consider next month.

“Those monies are necessary to sustain our support for the priorities of a Palestinian government that both the United States and Israel view as a true ally for peace,” he said.

“ Hamas wants to destroy Israel today,” responded Dave Weldon, R-Fla., “And Abbas and the Palestinian Authority want to destroy Israel tomorrow.”

But Negroponte called Abbas a “force for peace” and “the best available element that we have.” He maintained that the remaining months of the Bush administration still hold potential for peace.

“We would like to work with you to clarify the situation so we can achieve a release on your hold,” he told Lowey.

Lowey said she would hold the money pending receipt of a memo between the United States and the Palestinian Authority on how the money will be spent, as well as establishment of an account to manage the spending. The omnibus requires the State Department to certify establishment of one account through which the money flows in order to avoid duplication and cut down on corruption.

The U.S. Agency for International Development said it has provided Lowey a draft of the memo.

Negroponte came to the Hill to push for \$5.4 billion in fiscal 2008 spending that Congress has not enacted. That would include \$1.55 billion for Iraq and \$162.4 million for Afghanistan. It also contains \$500 million for a Mexican anti-drug trafficking plan and \$334 million for peacekeeping in Darfur.